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ABSTRACT

In predicting why one person may label behavior "sexual harassment" while others may be less inclined to interpret communication as harassing, four variables appear: the immediacy of the communication, employment in a field dominated by or balanced with members of the opposite sex, information about anti-harassment guidelines, and prior experience with harassment. Communication scripts (cognitive structures that help people function in day-to-day communication situations) can provide a useful framework for analyzing each of these variables in relation to the labeling of sexually harassing communication. This four-part model has implications for training workers to recognize and deal with potentially harassing situations. Future research should test the effects of immediacy, career choice, prior experience, and topical knowledge on the perception of sexual harassment. (DF)

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Communication Script Analysis: A Four-Part Model for Predicting Perception of Sexual Harassment

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Abstract

Four variables appear strong in predicting why one person may label behavior "sexual harassment" while others may be less inclined to interpret communication as harassing: 1) the immediacy of the communication, 2) employment in a field dominated by or balanced with members of the opposite sex, 3) information about anti-harassment guidelines, and 4) prior experience with harassment. Communication scripts provide a useful framework for examining how information is processed and the impact these elements have on interpretation of communication interactions.

Reports on the phenomenon of sexually harassing communication have occupied substantial journal space in recent years. Incidence surveys tend to be most numerous (Collins & Blodgett, 1981; Glamour, 1979; Kelber, 1975; Safran & Safran, 1976; Verba, DiNunzio, & Spaulding, 1983). In addition social science researchers investigate the personal impact of sexual harassment (Crull, 1979; Josefowitz, 1982), organizational concerns with its prevention (Deichman & Jardine, 1981; Driscoll, 1981; Hoyman & Robinson, 1980; Linenberger & Keaveny, 1982), and implications for litigation (Faley, 1982; Goldberg, 1978; Somers, 1982;). Others attempt to define sexually harassing communication (Booth-Butterfield, 1983; Reilly, Carpenter, Dull, & Bartlett, 1982) or explore reasons for its occurence (Gutek & Morasch, 1982; Kansas City Times, 1981; Remland & Jones, 1984; Tangri, Burt & Johnson, 1982).

Yet the fact remains that there is very little consensus on the communication behaviors which will be labeled sexually harassing. Men are often less likely than women to consider sexual innuendo, joking, or certain nonverbal actions as sexual harassment (Clatterbuck, 1981; Tangri, et. al., 1982; U.S. Office of Merit Systems, 1981) and may disagree on the frequency of such occurences as well (Collins & Blodgett, 1981).

However perception of sexually harassing communication is not consistent among women either. Collins & Blodgett (1981), Booth-Butterfield (1983), and Linenberger and Keaveny (1982) all describe wide discrepancies in subjects' perceptions of sexual harassment, both between and within the sex groupings.

Therefore, what is needed is a model to predict who is most likely to interpret communication behaviors as harassing and the factors leading to this interpretation. In other words, given two individuals in the same situation, what conditions will make one more likely than the other to interpret communication as "sexual harassment"?

Four variables appear strong in predicting perception of sexual harassment: 1) the immediacy of the communication behavior, 2) employment in a profession dominated by or balanced with members of the opposite sex, 3) information about harassment guidelines, and 4) prior experience in a harassing situation. The concept of scripts will be analyzed in linking each of these variables to the labeling of sexually harassing communication.

THE SCRIPT CONCEPT

Scripts are those sets of expectations and rules which guide us in enacting and interpreting routine communication interactions (Abelson, 1976, 1981; Schank & Abelson, 1977). Specifically, a script is a "hypothesized cognitive structure that when activated organizes comprehension of event-based situations," (Abelson,1981, p. 717). Thus, when a script is activated we tend to perceive communication according to the pattern established by that script.

Although the schema/script concept has received criticism for being "mushy" and broad enough to explain almost any behavior (Fiedler, 1982; Fiske & Linville, 1980), it can be a sound tool when implemented with a cognitive construct such as information processing (Fiske & Linville, 1980; Shaklee, 1983). This

approach directs us to a more precise explanation of how scripts are developed and the impact of existing scripts on subsequent information processing. The central tenet of the information-processing approach is that "the organism actively seeks out information in the environment, operates on this information, and adjusts its behavior according to some internal representation of this knowledge" (Markus & Sentis, 1982, p. 43). Accordingly, it is not sufficient to observe communicative actions in order to understand someone's responses, but we must also understand how those actions fit into their overall pattern of 'knowledge of the world'. Markus and Sentis further explain that these schemata or scripts are central cognitive units in this human information processing system. If we use the concept of scripts to examine the way in which information is explained, organized, and acted upon the construct becomes tighter and more appropriate for use in predicting behavior.

Most individuals have these cognitive structures, called scripts, which help us function in day-to-day communication situations. For example, Schank and Abelson describe a typical "restaurant script" for entering, ordering, and eating in a restaurant (1977). The script provides the individual with a set of rules and expectations so that when a new restaurant is entered it is not necessary to completely re-learn appropriate behaviors. Along similar lines, Bem explains many sex role-associated behaviors and ideas in terms of gender schemas or scripts (1981). Langer describes certain overlearned and automatic behaviors, such as complying with small requests, as a type of scripted behavior (Langer, Blank & Chanowitz, 1978;

Langer, & Imber, 1978). Douglas (1983) uses a script approach to compare high and low self-monitors' communication in initial interactions. In each instance comparisons are drawn between communication behaviors which are congruent with a script and those which are not. Communication which is congruent with an operative script does not receive special attention and tends to be processed almost automatically. However, when behaviors are recognized at a cognitive level as inconsistent with the ongoing script performance, special action must be undertaken to deal effectively with the new event. This model of analysis can be implemented in explaining how sexually harassing communication is processed.

Two aspects of scripts are particularly important for understanding how we function in a scripted situation: action rules and commitment (Abelson, 1981). First, a particular script is activated when we encounter the situation. At that time a set of "action rules" guides our interaction (Abelson, 1981; Cushman, 1977; Pearce, 1973). Such rules may serve to a) guide specific communicative behavior or b) form sets of expectations for interpreting the interaction. The handshake/greeting is a simple example of the guidance function. Action rules dictate that in most professional settings a handshake is the expected form of greeting. Therefore, we don't have to think extensively about it or try to interpret the action. Second, once we have initiated a script performance we typically feel committed to carry through with it unless the rules are violated or something unusual or atypical distracts us (Langer, et.al. 1978; Abelson, 1981). To illustrate, when we enact our restaurant script by entering the

restaurant, we typically comply with situational rules without comment. It may only be when the host leads us far to the rear of the dining area next to the restrooms and kitchen that we put a halt to the automatic nature of this script. For some people even this violation is insufficient to warrant breaking out of the routine. The concept of commitment to the action script is particularly important in understanding perception of sexually harassing communication. As long as coercive behaviors are labeled part of the work routine people exhibit commitment to complete the working script.

We have cognitive scripts for most communication situations which occur regularly and repeatedly (Abelson, 1976). Employment falls within this definition for most of us. "Behavior at work" scripts guide day-to-day communication so that interactions are conducted in an expected and predictable manner. For some people low level sexually harassing communication is incorporated as part of their routine script. For others the harassment draws attention to itself and breaks into the scripted communication. It is this process which we next examine.

MODEL COMPONENTS

#1 Immediacy

The more direct and immediate the sexually harassing communication, the more likely it is to break through the scripted routine and be labelled "harassment".

Booth-Butterfield (1983) found a strong relationship between the immediacy of the behavior and the intensity and frequency with which it was labeled harassing. That is, if the behavior was gazing or innuendo rather than direct touching or verbal

threat to the harassee, the communication was less often recognized and interpreted as harassment. Low-level harassing behavior tends not to interrupt the "behavior at work" script by emerging as an atypical situation. Instead it is often easier for such ambiguous communication to be processed as a "mistake" or incorrect perception of intent. For example, Reilly, et.al. reported that although much disagreement existed concerning ambiguous, suggestive behavior, an instructor's explicit threat to a student that her grades could suffer if she didn't cooperate had the highest regression value in determining perception of sexual harassment (1982). In addition, situations which threatened physical force were rated higher in perceived harassment than threat without use of force. The directness and immediacy of such threats allows little room for alternatives when processing information into the script.

Few people mistake direct, immediate coercion for a routine part of their "behavior at work " script. When sexual behavior or communication rises above that threshold of awareness, it becomes information to be processed separately from the script. Thus, the phenomenon is increasingly likely to be labeled as harassing.

#2 Occupation

Sexually harassing communication is more likely to be recognized and labelled harassment if the target is employed in a field populated by the opposite sex.

When targets receive social-sexual communication at work (a phenomenon Gutek and Morasch term sex-role spill-over [1982]), it is readily apparent that their co-workers of the opposite sex are not treated in the same way. The background provided by opposite

sex co-workers sets off recognition of the action. The targets of harassment become aware through social comparison, that they are being singled out for attention as individual women or men rather than functional employees. Wicklund and Frey (1980) report that heightened self awareness leads to less conformity to scripts. In other words, the recognition that others are not treated as you are, often leads to re-evaluation of the script. An employee might decide that "behavior at work" scripts should be similar for all employees regardless of gender.

Such contrasts are typically most pronounced in opposite-sex dominated occupations such as architect, machinist, or coal miner for women or nursing and secretarial jobs for men. Gutek and Morasch (1982) report that females in male-dominated work were more likely to report receiving social-sexual behaviors. In comparison, people employed in a same-sex dominated field such as the female secretary may tend to incorporate harassing communication into their overall view of the job. For example, females in traditional work such as waitress or stenographer were less likely to report being the target of sexual comments or harassment. Instead they referred to such communication as 'part of the job' (Gutek & Morasch, 1982). Such behavior is processed as part of the "behavior at work" script because employees have no clear background (i.e. co-workers of the opposite sex) against which to compare questionable behavior.

#3 Information

The more a person is educated about harassment the more likely he or she is to recognize and label harassing communication as an inappropriate part of the work script.

Bargh (1982) discusses "active scripts" which can be elicited to overcome an already established, passive behavioral script. By changing specific instructions for a task and thereby inducing an active script for the situation, the passive script can be over-ridden by the new information. Essentially the EEOC guidelines may provide such an active, alternative script for some people. A useful example is the "women's consciousness-raising" groups active in the 1970's. Their goal was to cause people to analyze and consider sex role concepts which previously had remained unquestioned. Illustrative of Langer's "mindless" processing of information (1978) many people never question sexist or coercive communication behaviors because such behaviors are part of the regular routine. However, in Bargh's terms an "active " script has been implemented when an employee "raises his or her consciousness" about legal or ethical guidelines against harassing communication. Subsequently, if coercive communication occurs it is more likely to be recognized and labeled harassement. While such active scripts are relatively short-lived, it seems logical that repetition and practice with the information would lead to its incorporation into the more stable "behavior at work" script. (This is presumably one of the intentions of clarification articles and EEOC published guidelines.)

On the other hand, as long as a worker remains uninformed, those coercive or unethical behaviors are likely to be assimilated into the overall "behavior at work" script. Again the result would be non-recognition of sexually harassing communication. Behavior which legally and ethically falls within the category of "sexual harassement" may not be perceived as such

until the employee has new information and is made specifically aware through induction of a new script.

#4 Previous Experience

People who have previous experience with recognized harassment are more likely to interpret subsequent communication as harassing.

Fazio and Zanna (1978) found that attitudes learned through direct experience with an issue or situation correlate better with behavior than do attitudes learned without direct involvement. One's attitudes toward harassment may not be as strong a predictor of actual labeling or interpretation of behavior if the labeler has never directly experienced harassing communication. The naive person's script remains intact until he or she becomes directly involved in the threatening interaction. Education ABOUT harassment is probably not as salient as direct experience WITH harassment.

This aspect may explain why many times men don't perceive harassment in communication situations where women do (Booth-Butterfield, 1983; Collins & Blodgett, 1981; Reilly, et.al., 1982). Whether because of cultural inequities, sex-role stereotyping, or asymmetrical power, women are more likely to have been in the position to directly experience harassment. Most studies agree that the target of most harassment is still primarily women.

However, a man's perception of the problem may be heightened in the event that it is his wife, daughter, friend, or even himself who is the target. At that point harassing comunication becomes a salient part of the man's environment as well, and the possibility of harassment occuring is added to his "behavior at

work" script (Graesser, Gordon, & Sawyer, 1979; Graesser, Woll, Kowalski, & Smith, 1980). It is interesting to note that while female students saw the most harassment in situations presented by Reilly and associates, male students who are also potential targets of instructor harassment perceived more harassment than faculty members (Reilly, et.al. 1982). According to Abelson (1981), the expectation of such a possibility facilitates organization of the script. Awareness of harassing phenomena is enhanced, and people will be more likely to label behavior "harassment". Without comparable direct experience others might not recognize sexually harassing communication.

CONCLUSIONS

Each of the elements of the model, 1) immediacy, 2) employment in occupations populated by both sexes 3) information about harassing behaviors, and 4) prior experience with sexually harassing communication, may operate individually to interrupt scripted communication. The elements may also converge and overlap to more strongly predict perception of sexual harassment. For example, a woman working in a male-dominated profession who has had a former employer threaten her sexually is probably more likely to label subsequent behavior harassing than is a female high school faculty-member who has never encountered direct harassing cues. In the former case low level sexual communication may be interpreted as harassment, while in the latter example breaking through the "behavior at work" script might be contigent upon more direct, immediate and unquestionable harassing communication.

A final note is in order concerning the environment in which the scripted behavior is enacted. It may be that organizations transmit subtle cues regarding appropriate "behavior at work" scripts, including organizational agendas and suitable interpretation of communication cues. While it is not the primary focus of this paper, the importance of context cannot be ignored when examining perception of communication behavior.

This model of predicting reponse to potentially harassing communication cues has several important implications for understanding why some people see coercion in situations where others do not. Rather than label non-perceivers as hostile, ignorant, or supportive of sexually harassing norms, this perspective focuses on a person's script of work communication. Thus the perception of sexual harassment becomes more amenable to "consciousness-raising" or education in order to alter the script and increase individuals' awareness of communication which is unethical although not necessarily blatantly sexual.

Further, this 4-part model has implications for training workers to recognize and deal with potentially harassing situations. Active scripts can be developed to provide alternative "work scripts". Such scripts might emphasize women and men in more equalitarian work roles and thus sensitize employees to communicative violations. This aspect in turn could help avert harassment in organizational settings rather than dealing with it after the incident occurs.

Finally, the next logical step with this model is direct empirical testing of the effects of immediacy, career choice, prior experience and topical knowledge on the perception of

sexual harassment. Results from existing studies offer some support the model. Booth-Butterfield (1983), Collins and Blodgett (1981) Tangri, et.al. (1982), and Reilly, et.al. (1982) all report differences in perception of harassment based on the extremity and immediacy of the behavior. Behaviors at extremes of coercion are consistently viewed as harassment, but as the immediacy declines so does the agreement.

Several organizations suggest workshops or other educational settings to increase workers' information on what constitutes "harassment" (Collins & Blodgett, 1981; Kroenenberger & Bourke, 1981; Livingston, 1982). However, the direct impact of such information on potential targets of harassment has yet to be assessed.

Most incidence studies support the third component of the model, prior experience with harassment, as a predictor of perception (Reilly, et.al., 1982; Tangri, et.al., 1982; US Merit Systems, 1981). Reilly and colleagues specifically noted that a) males exhibited less agreement on harassing communication than did females and b) that there was more agreement among respondents who had been victims of sexual harassment than among nonvictims.

Finally, the gender balance of work environment has also received limited support. Tangri, et.al. (1982) and Gutek and Morasch (1982) report increased recognition of sexually unethical communication when the male-female ratio in the work population is balanced or dominated by the opposite sex.

While these results are promising, the four central components have not been the primary independent variables of

research. Future studies need to examine the direct impact of each element of the model on labeling of sexual harassment. Nevertheless, at present communication script analysis offers a coherent model for predicting circumstances under which people are most likely to perceive communication behaviors as sexually harassing.

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